

## Interview with Rhonda Wilson – Profifoto Magazine, Edition: January/February 2003

the landscape photograph is something which traditionally shows the 'lie of the land', the 'reality' of the place and, in Great Britain, the 'englishness' of the countryside. rather than take this approach, sian bonnell's viewpoint introduces playfulness but also asks serious questions, reveals the fragility of a countryside exposed to the traumas of 'naturalisation', nostalgia, and dis-eases such as BSE and Foot-and-Mouth. she makes her 'marks' upon the landscape in ways which help us to critique traditional approaches to capturing the land and at the same time reinforces links to history and the delights of nature.

at first look, her images never cease to raise a smile - they are disarming in their apparent naivety. but loaded with questions around who designs and records the landscape and why. during the last two years, Bonnell has become increasingly influential within cannons of the establishment such as the Victoria and Albert Museum and now has representation from a London gallery.

you trained as a sculptor and seemingly had a fascinatiion for the landscape -  
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what did you learn at that time which remain foundations for your work as a photographer?

I didn't have a fascination for landscape when I was a student - that came later. What concerned me then was the question of space. Where do you put sculpture? I became fascinated with the space that sculpture occupies or might occupy and by the time I graduated I was making large scale rooms which were a little like stage sets for events or objects that might inhabit them. This remains a foundation for my work now - I use the landscape like an arena or stage set where things happen. I am still working with very formal concerns such as scale - the monumental qualities of certain objects, colour both of the objects themselves but also in the various backdrops and the way the objects change one's understanding of a particular environment when placed within it.

when you thought about the landscape then, how did you consider 'the look' of it? did you use photography to document your sculpture or garden projects?

When I was studying I had no knowledge or experience of landscape. Photography was purely a means of recording what I was making. Back then - like now - I was making very short-term pieces of unique events or juxtapositions of objects within a space. I realised very quickly that my work might always end up as a photograph or document of what I had made. I made the decision quite early on that rather than make the photograph act as a document of something else - as an illustration of the work - it should actually become the work. I received quite a lot of flak for this, certainly when I was undertaking postgraduate study - no-one was able to place me in any particular category - sculpture or photography. In those days it was quite important but never to me. In fact I was actively trying to combine sculpture with photography - at the time I did not know how I might achieve this so concentrated on

documenting the intangible - light passing over surfaces, time etc. All the work from this period took place in interiors - I would never have dreamed of working outside in the landscape. It wasn't until several years later when I found myself living in a small village 8 miles from any town with two small children in tow that I began to work outside. I had no studio and just one afternoon a week to myself - so I went out and began making photographs. My early attempts at landscape photography were not particularly inspiring - I realised that I needed to put my experience into my work and also more of myself in. It's quite straightforward in a way to stand behind a view with a camera and click - I wanted more from my work and myself than that.

do you think that the genre of landscape photography is a masculine thing? almost like capturing something which is, in essence, wild, or leaving marks which are indelible?

I think there is an element of that - but there are a lot of female landscape photographers who have been working for many years with quite a different sensibility to the masculine view. Liz Wells has written extensively on this very area and in 1996 and 2001 curated exhibitions and edited books on this.

I have discovered that the idea of the wild doesn't actually exist, although historically i suppose that was what those who worked within the genre were searching for. I think the masculine thing is about where one stands in surveying the land from a high viewpoint. Having talked to other female photographers there seems to be more of a rejection of this and more interest in the ground beneath one's feet making the whole thing more local or domestic. That is certainly where my interest lies, although I do not care to call myself a female photographer.

you could be seen to be replacing those 'installations' in the landscape, such as follies, lakes, towers, bridges - with things that in themselves are just as precious but are ultimately fragile - how do you make those things, like the jellies, look so powerful?

I think it has to do with scale. This is where my background in sculpture comes in. With the pieces made in 1996 (Groundings series) I discovered that the way to make the objects in the photographs more powerful or significant was to make sure that in the final prints the size of the object had to be the same size as it is in reality, or bigger. This causes a slight unsettlement in the viewer as the objects used were very much everyday known and recognisable ones. but in photographs we are used to seeing things in a smaller scale to the actuality. pinhole became quite a natural progression for me with this as the scale alters quite dramatically in a pinhole photograph. I also discovered that the placement of the camera is quite important. In the work made over the last 2 years, the camera is placed deliberately on the ground so that the viewer is given an altered perspective of view which also provides an altered perception of the objects. I'm afraid it's not very technical!

i have to ask you about the process - do you plan a photograph and then collect the props and go to a particular place or do you wander around with a bag of objects and 'come across' a location?

Mostly the first. I spend a long time in looking for suitable locations -

when I have found it I then turn up with a bag of props which have been decided upon beforehand. In work made between 1996-99 the locations were very much known to me through living there - it was my home and I was interested in the idea of 'home'. From 2000 onwards although I was still working in a very familiar environment, I began to work in unfamiliar territory in Wales, France and Holland. It was a fantastic experience to try and gain an understanding of these different places and to make much more site-specific work. In searching for locations I try and take into account the history of the place and to tap into some kind of collective memory as well as exploring my own feelings about a place.

for me, there is a great intelligence in this work, something very political, very tender and highly critical of traditional landscape practices - but it is humorous, non offensive and often entertaining. was this a deliberate strategy - to seduce with integrity?

Thank you for describing my work like that - that is a very kind description. The work is very serious and political but somehow the more serious I try to be - the funnier the images become. At first I was a bit upset about it - but over time I find the humour is quite useful after all as it does draw the viewer in and hopefully unsettles them afterwards. That is what I try to achieve in the pictures which work. I have always been concerned that my images should seduce - I want to make beautiful pictures but they have to have an edge to them as well so that one is slightly pricked on viewing. Also the concepts within them are multi-layered and it is important to me that I make images which can be read more than once.

some would say that you use photography to photograph your installations - I would say that you use photography to tell stories about issues of sometimes grave concern, such as conservation, extinction and the 'naturalising' of the land. how would you describe what you do?

It is quite difficult to describe what I do. All the things you mention are important issues in the work. There is another strand though which deals with intangibility and imagination. I am telling stories, although the narrative is very much an undercurrent in the work - it is not overt. I am not interested in making literal work. I said earlier that the work is multi-layered, I want the work to be read more than once - there is an awful lot going on in the images. For them to work they have to do several things. They must function aesthetically and formally - space, scale, colour, tone etc., they must also be the best print quality I can muster; they must pose questions on the subjects you have touched upon as well as the history of land use of the place.. I don't have to worry about them being humorous (except they mustn't be so funny that one misses the other stuff going on) and they must be unsettling, provoking a feeling of unease. There is no hierarchy to these layers - I want the pictures to do all of these things with just one viewing. On repeated viewings various strands hopefully become more evident.

this link with story telling leads us to your interest in the word - in 1999 you set up TRACE, which promotes collaborative responses between the visual and literary arts. how has this informed you as someone finding their way in the ever confusing image world?

Setting up TRACE was more of a parallel activity. Literature has been an

enormous influence on my work and I was interested in exploring this. It has been very interesting to discover how it influences a lot of other artists and to find that the visual and the literary are not so far apart.

what sort of image makers show at trace and what do they have in common, if anything? how do you decide on who shows there?

A lot of the work shown at Trace has been by photographers although we also show painting, sculpture, sound and installation work. All the artists shown have a strong poetic feel to their work and a sense of quiet - it is not easy to explain. When i select work I am looking for a literary or narrative thread running through which provokes further thought or debate about the work.

Most of the artists have seen the experience of a Trace show as an opportunity for them to engage with their work in a different way and many have shown unseen work for just that reason. I am interested in the process being a two way one - the viewer gets something from the experience but so should the artist. This becomes a process where everyone has an opportunity to shift their ideas and move something on even in a miniscule way - but something happens and everyone is changed ever so slightly. This is the idea behind Trace and it is proving to be a factory for new ideas where people actually do things rather than wait for something to happen. It's very exciting.

one of the things that i love about your work is that somehow, when i look at it, i know you are a mother. there is something really caring and tender about the way you work - you talk about 'when the domestic meets the wild' and that is so true - how does having a family influence your work?

Having a family has been the biggest influence on my work. I would certainly not be making the work I do now if I had not had my children. For one, it made me think about the whole idea of 'family'. It is not all rosy for everybody and for many, home is not always the safest place. Having children has made me explore these issues as well as those to do with food, land use and the legacy we are leaving to our future children in terms of consumerism and a culture of excess. The other way it influenced me was on a highly practical one. Lack of time and nowhere to work. It was out of necessity as much as anything else, that I began to work in the landscape. My initial experience of the landscape was quite naive - i was brought up in a city. i was totally seduced by the idea of 'the country'. This gradual realisation that in fact nature is not gentle or sweet or kind but raw and cruel and often smelly is something that i have explored and is a strong undercurrent to what is going on in my work. Having said all that, bringing the boys up in their early years, in a rural environment, was a fantastic experience for them as it was for all of us.

you are becoming increasingly more visible as an international artist - i look around and see your image on the front of the 'Seeing Things' exhibition at the Canon Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, i see you in books and essays regarding landscape, and now you have recently been taken on by a gallery - tell me what becoming visible means in terms of your life and practice

Certainly my life is busier now than it has been before and also more exciting and challenging. I am asked to give more talks now which i have always found daunting and tried to avoid as much as possible in the past but

these are all new challenges and experiences that I can only learn from and i am enjoying being stretched. Becoming visible is good; photography is communication after all - if i wanted to keep my ideas to myself i probably would not have chosen this particular activity. The best thing for me is that it has made me realise that I haven't been wasting my time these last 20 years and that it was worth it to keep going. In terms of my practice i just want to carry on and make good work.

how do you see the future in terms of your strategies for raising issues which concern you? there seems to be more and more emphasis on being 'economic' rather than cultural - how do you think you can continue to do both?

I think there is always a way to carry on if the issues one is concerned with are strong enough and the intentions behind them are honest. I suppose my strategies will remain much the same - i have to say i haven't thought about it very much. Like everyone else i worry about money and being able to fund my work but I am lucky to have some part time teaching which helps to cover those costs. With regard to the serious issues, I mentioned earlier that my work requires more than one reading. It has been accused at times over the years as being whimsical and only about puns so maybe the humour can act sometimes as a strategy for subversion and I have to say that idea does appeal to me.

thank you.

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